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Miniature blueprints, spider stratagems: a Michael Blake retrospective at 60

SEVENTEEN YEARS after the first democratic elections in South Africa in 1994, radical voices in the country are asking the question: to what extent does the South Africa of 2011 display more continuities than discontinuities with the apartheid state that preceded it? Writing in the *Mail and Guardian* of 29 April 2011, for example, *New Frank Talk* editor Andile Mngxitama motivated his call to boycott local government elections as follows:

The past 17 years of ANC rule can not longer be defended, even by elites who have benefited so handsomely from it [...]. When the ANC took over in 1994 and paid allegiance to the god of capitalism it meant that old white privileges would be maintained and a politically connected black layer would be allowed to accumulate.¹

This is not the voice of the corrupt political populists who dominate news headlines in South Africa, but of the radical intellectual inheritors of Steve Bantu Biko's Black Consciousness. Central to this debate, as Mngxitama's argument makes clear, is the belief that the 1994 negotiated settlement was a political 'deal' designed to ensure continued white privilege (fundamentally connected to acceptance of private property ownership as the basis of white wealth) and the qualified extension of that small class of owners to black politicians and, as they are known in South Africa, 'tenderpreneurs' (i.e. young black businessmen who are politically well-connected and become overnight millionaires through government tenders).

However, the date '1994' and the 'democratic miracle' connected to the release of Nelson Mandela has become so dominant discursively (not only in South Africa, but also internationally) that contemporary cultural production in South Africa has also become beholden to the myths of interpretation connected with these events. To be sure, South African art music has, since the early 1990s, been subject to major shifts in structural institutional support and formal political endorsement. Gone are the days when symphonies were commissioned to mark significant public commemorations, or choral works to celebrate milestone events. Symphony orchestras created during white minority rule in South Africa's major cities have been seriously depleted. Many have disappeared, and those that survived the general descent into chaos of coherent national arts funding and planning have done so with diminished capacity to function

1. Andile Mngxitama: 'SA's poor must shun the polls', in *Mail & Guardian*, 29 April–5 May 2011.

on any level that could be considered acceptable in even small or medium-sized places in the developed world. University music departments, created by the academic foot soldiers of a supportive political superstructure to supply an impressive, if relatively new, Western high art musical practice with practitioners, are surviving with varying degrees of success. Though very few have closed down completely, the quantity and quality of student enrolment and the relevance of teaching programmes to local context is an almost universal problem.

But these (admittedly negative) effects of democracy have not resulted in fundamental changes to the way art music has been 'going about its business' in post-apartheid South Africa. In January 2011 Gauteng-based composer Mokale Koapeng criticised 'years of under-education and mis-education of blacks' and the way in which this manifested itself in the South African art music establishment.² Earlier, in a review published in 2007 of the *Festschrift* celebrating the oldest Western art music institution in the country, Chris Walton had written:

It would be unthinkable today for a *festschrift*, say, celebrating the hundredth anniversary of a major conservatory in Germany to treat the years between 1933 and 1945 as merely another twelve years of normality. But this is precisely what is done here for the forty-odd years of apartheid [...] to ignore completely the simple, single fact that for over forty years, this institution – and many like it – served the interests of a fascist state whose premise was the big, black, White Lie of racial supremacy, is to compound that lie with a new one.³

The complexity of the relationship between Western art music and apartheid has since been probed in a growing number of papers, publications and theses.⁴ There is today no doubt that such complicity existed and continues to haunt the spectre of a Western music practice in South Africa. Despite this, as Walton suggests, art music practice has through its structures, scholars, performers and composers consistently de-emphasised and even denied its complicity with apartheid. 'Expected to wither on the vine when state funding was redirected', Jean-Pierre de la Porte confirms, 'the apartheid music juggernaut lives on and thrives below the radar like other relics of high apartheid: the AWB, the lobby for pure Afrikaans, the Orania Separatists, the Broederbond'.⁵

This context is important to understand the extent and significance of Michael Blake's contribution as a composer and music administrator-cum-entrepreneur in contemporary South African cultural life. Born on 31 October 1951 in Rondebosch, Cape Town, from mixed Afrikaans and English parentage (his mother was Maty Niewoudt and his father a British emigrant from Newcastle upon Tyne, George Blake), Blake began piano lessons at the University of Cape Town at the age of nine.⁶ Shortly thereafter, he started writing down his first compositions in the style of

2. Zingi Mfeka: 'No minor role for black keys in music', in *Sunday Times*, 15 January 2011.

3. Chris Walton: 'Review of *Konservatorium 1905–2005: die Departement Musiek en die Konservatorium aan die Universiteit Stellenbosch by geleentheid van die Eeufees 1905–2005*', in *Notes* 64/2 (2007), pp. 318–20.

4. Two of the most important theses in this regard are those by Carina Venter: 'The influence of apartheid intellectualization on early South African music historiography', MMus thesis, Stellenbosch University, 2009, and Annemie Stimie: 'Cosmopolitanism in early Afrikaans music historiography, 1910–1950', MMus thesis, Stellenbosch University, 2010.

5. Jean-Pierre de la Porte, 13 February 2010, <http://kaganof.com/kagablog/category/contributors/jean-pierre-de-la-porte/page/2>.

6. See 'Michael Blake 50: interview with Stephanus Muller', in *Musica* 30/1 (2002), pp. 119–26, esp. p. 119. Unless mentioned otherwise, the biographical information presented here is taken from this published interview with Michael Blake, supplemented by information on his personal website, www.michaelblake.co.za.

Bach, Mozart and Chopin. After the family had relocated to Johannesburg in the late 1960s, Blake enrolled for his BMus studies at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) in Johannesburg in 1970. Here he was lectured by among others Geoffrey Chew, who introduced him to the music of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, and June Schneider who lectured in 20th-century music and composition. He took piano lessons from the legendary pianist and teacher Adolph Hallis, described by Blake as a 'great promoter of new music in his earlier years in London, mounting regular concerts of then new works at the Wigmore Hall.'⁷ During his time at Wits he also got to know a fellow young music student who would become an important influence in later years: Kevin Volans.

Blake 'discovered' 20th-century music at university, and his first 'experiments' (as he terms them) were piano duos that he describes as

everything you could possibly do with the instrument, not much melody or harmony, but lots of clusters and playing on the strings, a cadenza for the pedals, and so on – piano hooliganism one might have called it. It was also a chance to experiment with the fashionable graphic notation of that time. I never wrote sonatinas and fugues and song-cycles like all good composition students were supposed to do, mainly because I never really had a composition teacher.⁸

In this sense, then, Blake was a not untypical South African autodidact composer, learning 'to compose by osmosis', in his own words. The roots of his later experimentalist aesthetic are no doubt traceable to this lack of formal training. Like many other untrained composers far removed from new compositional developments, the piano became the source through which Blake could explore as much new music as he could find in score. His fluent pianism enabled encounters with Messiaen, Schoenberg, Webern, Stockhausen and Cage. In the final year of his BMus studies he formed a new music group, The Orion Ensemble, which also performed Feldman, Bussotti and Ives as well as Blake's own music. The Orion Ensemble played in art galleries and various university venues, and in 1977 Mannie Manim gave its successor, Moonchild, a regular platform at the Market Theatre.⁹

After its opening on 21 June 1976, Manim's Market Theatre (also known as 'The Theatre of the Struggle') was one of the few places in South Africa where blacks and whites could mix. Manim's invitation to Moonchild constitutes a rare link between the cultural anti-apartheid struggle and new music performance in South Africa's history. Describing the relationship between politics and composition during this time, Blake remembers that 'Being a composer in South Africa was always such an isolated thing, and (white) South African composers were unpolitical and politically unaware.'¹⁰ During these years the anti-apartheid sport boycotts campaigned under the banner of 'No normal sport in an abnormal society'. The South African establishment complained bitterly that it was 'trying to keep politics out

7. *ibid.*, pp. 119–20.

8. *ibid.*, p. 120.

9. *ibid.*, p. 120.

10. *ibid.*, p. 121.

of sport',¹¹ while refusing to recognise that their own racial policies were responsible. Similar boycotts, less high profile than those against sport teams, were instituted against South African universities and artists, as well as against institutions and artists maintaining links with South Africa.¹² Few, if any, South African composers institutionalised in the country's universities objected publicly about the racial laws that prompted these measures. Although Blake took part in student demonstrations at Wits, and gave performances under the aegis of Aquarius (the cultural wing of the radical student movement Nusas), in general new music in its programming and agenda was not aligning itself with the struggle:

I was completely unaware of what black composers were doing – their work came as a revelation much later – though I listened to a lot of black South African jazz. In my school days when I was so unstimulated by Christian National Education I used to listen to the jazz programmes on Radio Bantu every day and go to the Cape Town Art Centre in Green Point on Sunday nights where one heard Abdullah Ibrahim, Winston Mann and others.¹³

The intensification of the political struggle in South Africa coincided with Blake's first exposure to the international world of New Music when he attended the summer courses in Darmstadt and Dartington. In Darmstadt he attended lectures and masterclasses by Aloys Kontarsky, György Ligeti and Mauricio Kagel (who became a long-term influence) and in Dartington he attended a two-week composers masterclass with Peter Maxwell Davies. He had a short piece workshopped by the Fires of London and met the exiled South African composer Stanley Glasser, who was then the Head of Music at Goldsmiths College, London. After attending the summer courses, Blake returned to South Africa, where he hosted Kevin Volans on one of his field trips in 1977. He remembers that Volans was 'very enthusiastic about the possibilities for South African composers who were interested enough to take a look at African music. But almost no one was interested at the time'.¹⁴

By this time Blake could no longer ask for exemption from military service, something he had requested since his first call to conscription in 1969 and completion of a short period of basic training in January 1970 and subsequent camps at a local commando unit. In 1976 Blake's military unit was on standby during the Soweto riots (although he was on his way to Darmstadt), and in 1977 when he was conscripted into the border war, he left South Africa for London. The last piece he composed in South Africa was *Night music* for chamber ensemble (African Notebook no.4), which had two performances in the Market Theatre by his own ensemble. Blake has continually resisted describing as 'exile' his time spent abroad to avoid being conscripted into the apartheid army. He has been frank in admitting that, as a British passport holder, he found London a welcome escape from a very parochial musical scene, and that leaving South Africa in 1977 was

11. Rob Nixon: 'Apartheid on the run: the South African sports boycott', in *Transition* 58, pp.68–88, esp. p.77.

12. Rob Nixon lists the military, nuclear and oil bans, as well as the divestment movement, the freezing of bank loans and the moratoria on sporting, cultural and academic contexts as constituting 'the matrix of international actions' against South Africa. See Nixon: 'Apartheid on the run', p.70.

13. 'Michael Blake 50', p.121.

14. *ibid.*, p.121.

beneficial to him as a composer. This is an openness that has won him few friends from the old white establishment (who has always viewed 'draft dodging' as an unpatriotic act) and the former exiles (for whom exile has become a founding myth of liberation).

In London Blake enrolled for a MMus in analysis at Goldsmiths. He was appointed to the part-time staff to direct the Goldsmiths New Music Ensemble and later formed Metanoia, a development from an informal duo with trumpeter and fellow MMus student Jonathan Impett. The ensemble later grew to include clarinet/saxophone, percussion and cello as well as a sound technician. Both Blake and Impett wrote pieces for the group, but also commissioned composers like Michael Finnissy to write new works. The main aim of the ensemble was to explore live electronics and pieces with pre-recorded tape. Blake wrote two pieces for Metanoia: *Taireva* (1978–83) and *Self-delectative songs* (1986). For *Taireva* he tried to import a kudu horn from International Library of African Music Director Andrew Tracey, which 'was seized by customs at Heathrow Airport as being livestock'.¹⁵ It is clear from his worklist that Blake's heart was not in the compositional possibilities of technology. His first 'African Notebook' piece (Prelude and Fugue in Bb minor, BWV867) was already composed in 1975 and followed at regular intervals by new additions to this path of exploration: *Songs without words* for cello and piano (1975), *Flute, clarinet, cello, piano* (1976), *Ground weave* for orchestra and harpsichord respectively (1976), the already mentioned *Night music* for chamber ensemble (1977) and *Fantasia on one note*, an arrangement of Purcell for flute, clarinet, percussion, piano, guitar, viola and cello (1977). In 1978 the African Journal pieces (presumably more concentrated African explorations than the African Notebook pieces) would start, initially with *Hymn and variations* for string quartet and followed by *Hocket* for large chamber ensemble (1979), *Spring in new X* for large chamber ensemble (1979) and *Sub-Saharan dances* for large chamber ensemble (1980). *Taireva* ('We were talking'), is the fifth work in this series, and still includes a four-track tape in combination with the acoustic instruments of viola, cello and prepared piano. From this point on the exploration of African compositional techniques becomes of overriding importance to Blake. *Marimba* for soprano, actor and marimba (1981) and *Self-delectative songs*, scored for flugelhorn, cello and piano (1986) underscore this. In the 1985 notes to his *Homage à MDCLXXV* (1985; revised and finished in 1994 and dedicated to Paul Simmonds), Blake notes that 'a certain simplicity and restraint' has appeared in his work, making it more possible for him to compose for the classical harpsichord. However, he would only achieve the final version of this work in 1994 – 'with tremendous relief' according to his autograph score – suggesting that this process of an ever more refined 'simplicity and restraint' would only become a comfortable compositional

15. *ibid.*, p. 122.

voice much later.¹⁶ By 1986 Blake had also broken with Metanoia and started a new ensemble, London New Music, of which he became the sole director and pianist.

London New Music wanted, in Blake's words, to 'programme the kind of radical, experimental pieces that were not being heard at that time, and which commissioned the kind of composers that I felt needed a platform.'¹⁷ It seems that his interest was in work that occupied a place outside the 20th-century mainstream and was principally influenced by the American experimental tradition: Charles Ives, Henry Cowell, John Cage, Morton Feldman, La Monte Young, Terry Riley and, in Britain, Cornelius Cardew, Gavin Bryars, Howard Skempton and John White. There is little doubt that Blake's interest in this music was not unconnected to the rejection of the Stockhausen aesthetic by Kevin Volans in the late 1970s. Volans's association with the New Simplicity movement in Germany lent impetus to Blake's African explorations within the aesthetic of an experimentalism concerned with what could be done with limited musical and conceptual means. Indeed, from 1987 a number of elements occur in his work that would also become characteristic of his mature style: pedal points, limited tonal means, very sparing use of consonant intervals and a preference for perfect fourths and fifths and open octaves, repetitive patterns of great simplicity and the gradual expansion of these patterns in an additive way. The contexts within which these characteristics appear (*Beamish grace* and *Cum martelli incudena*, both from 1987, are examples) suggest their possible application as stylistic imitations of archaic styles. However, Blake's later stylistic development suggests that it is more likely that his attraction to these archaic formulas derives from their complementarity to his inherent sound sensibility.

Blake's interest in a cosmopolitan musical experimentalism during the eighties was to have major consequences after his return to South Africa in January 1998. Presenting a paper at the Annual Congress of what was then still the Musicological Society of Southern Africa and in which he discussed the emergence of a South African experimental aesthetic, Blake hoisted the standard of musical experimentalism as a way forward for South African composition. In this 1998 paper he spoke of an 'experimental tradition', writing that composers and musicologists have looked back in history to find prototypes for experimentalism in the music of composers like Charles Ives, Henry Cowell, Edgard Varèse and Ruth Crawford Seeger.¹⁸ Although his definition of experimentalism was vague (he used the concepts 'uncertainty', 'loss of control' and included minimalism and multi-ethnicism), he identified his own work and the music of fellow South African-born composers Kevin Volans, Martin Scherzinger, Rüdiger Meyer, Dirk de Klerk, David Kosviner, Bongani Ndodana and Matteo Fargion

16. Michael Blake's documents and scores were donated to the Documentation Centre for Music (DOMUS) at the University of Stellenbosch, South Africa, in 2010. The music discussed in this article was consulted at DOMUS.

17. 'Michael Blake 50', p.122.

18. Michael Blake: 'The emergence of a South African experimental aesthetic', in *Proceedings of the 25th annual Congress of the Musicological Society of Southern Africa, 1998*, pp.1-6, esp. p.2.

as possibly conforming to the experimentalist aesthetic. It was with the impetus of this aesthetic that Blake saw the opportunity for South African composers to adopt non-Western music, and so 'to look musically closer to home to reassess their aesthetic positions'.¹⁹ The characteristics of non-Western music that made it suitable for the experimental aesthetic were, according to Blake, 'a lack of teleology, a present-centredness' and then, very important, the 'absence of closed self-referential structure' that has the effect of 'diminishing the identity of a composer, of flattening out style'.²⁰ In contrast to the Adornian view of 'experimentalism' as a stigmatised label, Blake used the term as a badge of honour, even a slogan. Where Blake's creative and entrepreneurial work has been irksome (to say the least) to many South African peers, is in his connection of experimentalism with a notion of musical 'progress in artistic technique':

Although this century has witnessed an upsurge in the number of South African composers, as in the other arts, new developments and trends in Europe and America tend to take a long time to reach our shores. For example, serialism had been developed in the 1920s by Schoenberg and elaborated further in the 1950s by Stockhausen and Boulez, becoming established as the bulwark of the European avant-garde. Although this technique was already being abandoned in Europe and America a decade later, it was only from the 1970s onwards that a number of South African composers, such as Peter Klatzow and Graham Newcater, adopted aspects of serial technique. By the same token, the techniques and aesthetic of American experimental music, including minimalism and transethnicism, have barely gained a foothold here yet.²¹

In this flow of technical progress, Blake seems to suggest, South African composers fall behind their European and North-American counterparts, often by decades. Following on from this, it would be reasonable to conclude that he positioned the 'experimental aesthetic', of which he has since become the undisputed figurehead, as the South African radical aesthetic of the moment and the future.

But these developments would follow only a decade hence. In 1989/90, Blake was not yet thinking of returning to South Africa. He was, however, thinking of leaving England and moving to Europe. His first marriage had ended and he was dispirited with a creative context in which all things 'Thatcherite, glossy and beautiful' had become the dominant aesthetic. During this time he composed *Honey gathering song* (initially composed for the dance *For the off* by Gill Clarke in 1989 and revised in 1999). The work is an interesting case study that shows the role of revision in Blake's oeuvre and the way in which his writing developed during the decade before his return to South Africa. The pencil sketches for *For the off* are fluent continuity drafts where revision is almost singularly concerned with register, rhythmic placement and pitch location, all very carefully calibrated by the greater interest of creating balance on a macro-structural level. Balance, i.e. the way fragments are 'weighted' in musical terms relative to what precedes and

19. *ibid.*, p. 2.

20. *ibid.*, p. 2.

21. *ibid.*, p. 1.

follows, is clearly a main concern for Blake (this is also clear, incidentally, from the sketched revisions to the piano duet *Let us run out of the rain*, 1986). If the 1989 and 1999 versions of *Honey gathering song* are compared, it becomes clear that for Blake 'revision' has less to do with improving deficient work, but rather with 'remaking' existing work. The 1989 version in its minimalist notational guise of short repeated fragments of two bars emphasise, if anything, the modular structure of the music and the potential

♩ = 120

Flute

2nd only

Piano

1st only

♩ = ♩

The musical score is presented in a system with two staves. The top staff is for the Flute, and the bottom staff is for the Piano. The Flute part is written in a single line with a treble clef. The Piano part is written in a grand staff with a treble and bass clef. The score is divided into two main sections. The first section is marked '2nd only' and the second section is marked '1st only'. The Flute part consists of short, repeated fragments of two bars. The Piano part is also divided into two sections: the first section is marked '2nd only' and the second section is marked '1st only'. The score is written in a minimalist style with short repeated fragments of two bars. A tempo marking of ♩ = 120 is at the top left, and a dynamic marking of ♩ = ♩ is in the middle of the Flute staff.

Ex.1a: Blake: *Honey gathering song*, 1989 version, opening

Ex.1b: Blake: *Honey gathering song*, 1999 version, opening

Flute

Piano

$J = 120$

f

mf

mp

of taking it apart and re-using it (ex.1a). This is a promise that is fulfilled in the 1999 version, which shows a much greater rhythmic sophistication and expanded interest in the dialogic possibilities of different tone colours, rather than their contrapuntal marriage (ex.1b). The already restricted means are pared down even further, with the introduction of **change** in the music (new pitches, rhythmic shifts or textural thickening) assuming structural significance. Blake's utilitarian re-use of existing material, reminiscent of a musical practice before the musical 'work' had solidified its autonomous claims, has little in common with a postmodern approach to collage or its

various derivative musical techniques. It presupposes a stylistic coherence (rather than eclecticism) within which material can be moved around, a style-affirming gesture in a musical context that is extremely organic. In this sense structural 'modularity' in the music of Michael Blake has less to do with pre-fabricated parts or shapes and their linear juxtaposition, and more with the elasticity of units of material that share a majority of its DNA and its reflection and refraction backwards and forwards.

These stylistic traits would become more established during the decade before Blake returned to South Africa. However, his plans to leave England in the early nineties didn't come to fruition. He fell in love with an English pianist (Sally Rose) and started work on a group of works written for Rose and featuring the piano. The piano concerto *Out of the darkness* (a title taken from a statement made by Archbishop Tutu at the time of South Africa's first democratic election) was written in 1993/94 and premiered in June 1994 in Brighton. The work has since been withdrawn, but in the same year he wrote his first large-scale solo piano piece, *French suite* (ex.2), a work regarded by the composer as an important milestone (he submitted it, unsuccessfully, for the Helgaard Steyn Award – South Africa's biggest composition prize – in 1998). Important in this work is the exploration of piano sonority per se (a concern with the perceptual presence of sound rather than sound as medium for structure), 17th- and 18th-century French Baroque music, French impressionist music and the music of North Africa. *French suite* was followed by *Reverie* for two pianos (inspired by Olive Schreiner's *Story of an African farm* and San rock paintings), which was premiered during the Africa 95 Festival in London at the ICA by Sally Rose and the Australian pianist Tony Gray.

Early in 1997 Blake made a private visit to South Africa to investigate the possibility of returning to the country he had left 20 years earlier. He was subsequently invited to six South African universities to give a lecture-recital on experimental piano music from Britain.²¹ One of these universities was Rhodes University in Grahamstown in the Eastern Cape, where the newly-appointed Head of Department was a British émigré (she emigrated to South Africa in 1974), former Black Sash activist and influential musicologist and music educationalist Christine Lucia. They fell in love and married, prompting Blake to return to South Africa permanently. In Grahamstown Blake launched the South African ISCM Section in 1999 and a festival of new music, the New Music Indaba, in 2000.²² These interventions, for that is what they were, were the most important structural developments for contemporary composition in South Africa for decades.

After the unbanning of the African National Congress in the early 1990s, South Africa had made a tentative re-appearance at the ISCM through a presentation of the South African Music Rights Organization (SAMRO) and

22. South Africa had last been a member of the ISCM in 1959. It joined in 1948 under the leadership of Eric Chisholm, then the newly appointed Dean and Director of the South African College of Music (i.e. the Faculty of Music at the University of Cape Town), and had its first meeting on 15 September of that year, barely six months after the National Party had come to power. Turning down offers from the South African government for financial assistance (a condition of the grant was that audiences should be segregated), the South African ISMC section was dissolved in 1959 due to financial problems. See Michael Blake: 'South African composers on the world stage: the ISCM in South Africa', in *Fontes Artis Musicae* 54/3 (2007), pp. 359–73, esp. pp. 360 and 365.

Ex.2: Blake: *French suite*, opening

♩ = 120

pp

p

mf

the performance of SAMRO Board member Hans Roosenschoon's orchestral work *Iconography* at the festival's Gala Concert on 15 May 1992 by the Warsaw Philharmonic Orchestra.²³ Blake's description of Roosenschoon's paper delivered at the occasion as rather a 'whitewash' of the 'South African music scene of the previous four decades under apartheid' (echoes here of Walton's criticism of the Stellenbosch Konservatorium Festschrift quoted earlier in this article) explains the manner of South Africa's rejoining the ISCM seven years later. When Blake eventually led South Africa back into the ISCM after a short presentation at the World Music Days in Bucharest in 1999, the present writer was among those who criticised him for not acting in a broadly consultative manner.²⁴ Blake's defence at the time and published in a later article, was simple:

²³ *ibid.*, pp.166–67.

²⁴ Stephanus Muller: "‘Quo vadis, obelisk’: SA musiek trek swaar", in *Die Burger*, 13 June 2001.

The difference between Bucharest in 1999 and Warsaw in 1992 lay perhaps in the fact that NewMusicSA [the new ISCM South African Section] was an overtly post-apartheid organization, without much apartheid-era baggage in need of transformation.²⁵

He was proved right. The nature of the South African political transition was such that the old ruling class and their institutions were left intact to a larger or lesser extent. Without comprehensive changes of personnel at all levels of institutional structures, 'transformation' and 'reform' were restricted to the counting of racial quotas, while educational and artistic agendas remained fundamentally intact despite superficial signs to the contrary. In this context of seeming tumultuous political change undergirded by less visible but tenacious continuities of apartheid thinking and agendas in cultural politics, Blake's NewMusicSA could hardly have made a more strategically astute decision than not to get institutional consensus for its actions and programmes. For the next decade (during which Blake was president for six years), NewMusicSA invigorated contemporary music in the country while university music departments, arts councils and symphony orchestras struggled to reposition themselves in a non-racial, openly Euro-antagonistic environment. As Director of the New Music Indabas from 2000 to 2006, Blake presided over the reconnection of South African contemporary composition with the international world. But perhaps even more importantly, he approached institutionally marginalised composers, primarily young and black composers, in ways that South Africa's recalcitrant and passive white institutions (and eventually ineffectual 'transformed' institutions) failed to do. The Growing Composers Project, which started as part of the Indaba 2000, was a unique opportunity for black composers from the informal sector to engage with a sphere of music making from which they had been structurally excluded.²⁶ Historically important figures like Ntsikana, Reuben Caluza, John Knox Bokwe and Michael Moerane were resurrected. Living composers such as Phelelani Mnomiya, Mokale Koapeng and Andile Khumalo were engaged and performed. Interesting composers outside of academe and conventional art music performance practices and structures such as Julia Raynham, Paul Hammer and Carlo Mombelli were encouraged to develop their individual voices in a celebration of an exuberant plurality that overshadowed anything attempted in institutional structures with far more infrastructure and funding available to them.

One of the most impressive achievements of this time, also initiated by Blake, was the Bow Project. Inspired by the music of famous Xhosa uhadi player, composer and song leader Nofinishi Dywili, who died in 2002 at the age of 83, the project resulted in a recording launched at the University of Stellenbosch in 2010. The double CD set contains a succession of 13 string quartets, intimate musical ruminations on the music of the second CD, that of Nofinishi Dywili.²⁷ Using field recordings (dating between 1980 and

25. Blake: 'South African composers', p. 368.

26. See Blake's description of this project in 'Die informelle Akademie: alternative Zugangsweisen zum Kompositionsstudium in Südafrika', in *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* 167/3 (2006), pp. 26–27.

27. Nightingale String Quartet, *The Bow Project*, tufl FKT 044.

2002) of the Xhosa music scholar Dave Dargie, NewMusicSA aimed to give up to 20 composers an opportunity to study, re-imagine and recompose music from one of the greatest musical traditions in South Africa: the solo song self-accompanied by one-string bow. Blake describes how he saw the medium of the string quartet 'as providing a perfect bridge between the world of traditional bow music and the world of new classical music'.²⁸ Of the 14 composers whose work can be heard on this CD, the minority are academically institutionalised. Nothing like the originality, scale and success

[illegible]

of this project had been attempted by any of South Africa's institutional custodians of 'composed music'.

Blake's own contribution to the Bow Project was his concentrated String Quartet no.3 (ex.3), subtitled 'Nofinishi' (2009). Dedicated to Kevin Volans, it is based on the song *Inxembula* ('The ugly one'), but also refers back to the piano piece *Ways to put in the salt* (2002). It is memorably described by artist and collaborator Aryan Kaganof (whose remix of Blake's Third Quartet, *Anahat*, is also included on the CD) as

a crystalline example of what I have chosen to call the composer's 'spider's strategem'. A composing system unique to Michael Blake which is heavily indebted to the intricately complex but always perfectly resolved structure of the web. Despite shifting patterns based on ancient uhadi bow music, and harmonies that bring mediaeval choral textures to mind, the futuristic sound progression of this quartet is irrevocably Blakean: the end begins with the first note played.²⁹

Elsewhere in this review Kaganof's identification of the Deleuzian multiplicity of fragments comprising the brief expression of the Third Quartet is an astute observation on what he identifies as a 'late-phase' compositional solution to expanded form in Blake's use of limited musical means. 'The extreme compression of means utilized in this string quartet is such', writes Kaganof, 'that many of the regulating elements could conceivably be unraveled, stretched out, to create a series of compositions'. Quartet no.3 was preceded by the more extended String Quartet no.2 (2006) and the String Quartet no.1 (2001), which constitutes one of Blake's most interesting structural and technical engagements with the medium, but also, significantly, with larger form before the concentration of the Third Quartet became conceivable. This interest in stretching the possibilities of the experimental aesthetic (as described by Blake himself as constituting 'uncertainty' and 'loss of control') to express larger form can be traced to the work *Untitled* for clarinet in A and piano (2000). An enormous matrix in his sketches illustrates how the composer mapped the structure of what turned out to be a piece of nearly 20 minutes in duration. Written for clarinetist Robert Pickup and pianist Jill Richards, two performers whose abilities must have tempted the exploration of pyrotechnic boundaries, the result was surprisingly not a more virtuosic kind of writing, but rather one in which intensity and focus has to be sustained in an almost super-human way within the context of kaleidoscopic fragments (exx.4a & 4b).

I would argue that *Untitled* is the formal experiment that pivots between the miniature as form and the miniature as technique in Blake's oeuvre. In conversation two years after the composition of *Untitled*, Blake described his formal approach as follows:

One parameter that I keep very fluid is that of form. I usually have no idea whether a piece will end up in one or several movements, and how long individual movements will be,

29. Aryan Kaganof:
'String Quartet no.3: a new
composition by Michael
Blake', <http://kaganof.com/kagablog/category/contributors/michael-blake/page/4>.

indeed how long the piece will be... I'm not great on formal pre-planning, I find that it can be inhibiting. But I do make sketches – both graphic and in musical notation – and juggle these around to try and find a satisfying sequence and eventually a form.³⁰

This approach, which describes Blake's formal approach before his interest in extended form like *Untitled*, exists within an entire aesthetic of 'informal' techniques, including significant reliance on repetition as a rhetorical gesture. Recurring patterns or sections are foregrounded as interruptions or discontinuities in the music, but essentially, of course, what it emphasises is

30. 'Michael Blake 50', p.126.

Ex.4a: Blake: *Untitled*, opening

♩ = 124

Clarinet in A

Piano

The musical score for the opening of Michael Blake's *Untitled* is presented in three systems. Each system consists of two staves: the top staff is for the Clarinet in A and the bottom staff is for the Piano. The tempo is indicated as ♩ = 124. The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The time signature is 3/4. The Clarinet part begins with a mezzo-piano (mp) dynamic and plays a repeating eighth-note pattern. The Piano part begins with a piano (p) dynamic and plays a repeating eighth-note pattern with five-fingered chords. The score is divided into three systems, each with two staves. The first system has a repeat sign at the end. The second system also has a repeat sign at the end. The third system ends with a final cadence.

The image displays a musical score for two instruments: Clarinet in A and Piano. The score is organized into three systems. The first system features the Clarinet in A part on a single staff with a treble clef, showing a melodic line with slurs and fingerings (5, 6, 5). Below it, the Piano part is written on a grand staff (treble and bass clefs), featuring a complex rhythmic accompaniment with many beamed sixteenth notes. The second and third systems continue the Piano part, showing further development of the rhythmic patterns and harmonic structure. The key signature is one flat (B-flat), and the time signature is 4/4.

Ex.4b: Blake: *Untitled*, ending

the continuity of indisputably organic structure. The organic relationship that pertains to background material in the forms preceding *Untitled* is not part of the overt gestures of repetition, and is in fact very intuitive, almost improvisatory. In these compositions sounds react to the smallest particles of other sounds and the smallest of musical reminders to recent sounding material are able to trigger new explorations. Thus the material remains alive to its context, without cementing itself in pre-determined units suitable for constructing more traditional and extended musical structures. The humour so consistently present in this music inheres in its rhythmical

design. It has to do with time, and timing, and split-second mistiming. It is perhaps the aspect of Blake's music that is the most performer-dependent, because the effects of lightness, of surprise and of intuitive playfulness are very precisely composed, requiring precision of execution and a lightness of touch. Blake's own pianism encapsulates aspects of this sound: self-effacing, shy and uervous almost, with an understated expressiveness confined to the lower dynamic levels of the piano (almost never more than a *mezzo forte*). Unlike Prokofiev, say, where the wit frequently inhabits the short and explosive attack, in the case of Blake it lingers and glides and insinuates, which means that its presence is not inconsistent with sadness or nostalgia, also characteristic of much of this music. And as in the case with Prokofiev, the humour in the music is not inconsistent with an exquisite lyrical instinct. This is soft music, sounding muted even when it is loud, but it is also a dry kind of softness. There is no padding here, no lushness of sound, no *dolcissimo cantabile*, but something approaching a dry lyricism of extreme brittle delicacy. When all of this is put together, one hears a music more akin to poetry than to prose, more suggestive than prescriptive. It is music that leaves much unsaid, but that articulates this silence in a most eloquent and meticulous way. Characteristic of the forms preceding *Untitled*, this is also the technique of the miniature.

• *Untitled* seems concerned with maintaining the integrity of this technique over a longer period of time. It sets about doing this through minutely altered repeated gestures that turn the music inwards and directs the musical trajectory towards expanded form. The more concentrated the motifs employed – and they reach an unparalleled degree of concentration in this work – the more the focus shifts to the sound and its attributes (articulation, colour, dynamics, alignment, frequency, attack) with subsequent de-emphasis of rhythm or horizontal or vertical pitch considerations. The form of the miniature, whether large or small, is the tableau. It does not narrate diachronically, but synchronically. The guiding metaphor is not 'forward', but 'deeper' or 'inward'. In fact, the very structure of the archetypal motif in this music seems designed to stop flow, fluidity, the suggestion of perpetual mobility and therefore inevitability. In practice this works by suggesting a motion with the smallest of gestures (an ascending major second, the archetypal gesture of the entire piece) and denying the promise by repeating the last note or sonority of the gesture before repeating the entire motif. Or by expanding the ascending interval with a repeated note, or by abruptly switching from an interrupted two bars of semiquavers to a pattern that preceded the build up to this 'flow' in a reality check. It is a music of interruption, return, stop-start, return, addition, return, gap, pattern, return. The relentless obsessiveness of this agenda identifies the work as a miniature.

In his subsequent String Quartet no.1, Blake attempts another larger form (c.20 minutes of music, again evidently planned in the sketches by a matrix considering the selection, balance and weight of material), but the music is more lyrical, less relentless, more giving. There is a greater concern with a wider spectrum of expressive possibilities. It is almost as if *Untitled* had established the premises for expanded form of the musical miniature, and String Quartet no.1 applied these premises without insisting on proving them. This is confirmed by the smaller-scale piece, *Ways to put in the salt* for solo piano (2002), in which the lessons of applying prolongation techniques now find their application in smaller form yet again. A succession of meditative variations inspired by Xhosa music, this music shows the freedom of musical succession also characteristic of the first quartet, but formed in the crucible of *Untitled*. The song cycle *Solstice* (2004) is also a mature beneficiary of this development. Directed by the crisp poetry of Grahamstown poet Don MacLennan, and informed throughout by Britten's *Serenade*, this setting for tenor, horn and piano contain exactly the elasticity that had developed in the treatment of pattern and placement, but realises to a much greater extent than before the latent harmonic translucence previously overshadowed by more formal considerations. It is as if the poetry relieves Blake from the obligation to manage formal structure and calibrate relationships. The result is a freedom of expression unrivalled by the instrumental pieces up to that time.

Perhaps the most significant implications to date of the problems worked out in *Untitled*, are heard in the *Piano sonata (choral)*, composed in 2008 and dedicated to the Belgian pianist who premiered the work in that same year at the Gentse Feesten in Belgium, Daan Vandewalle. A four-movement structure spanning half-an-hour, the work puts to the test how the Blakean tenets of repetition, non-teleological structure, narrative absence and thematic anonymity³¹ maintain stylistic coherence under pressure of a vastly extended pitch and dynamic range intended to showcase a truly virtuosic pianism (ex.5). The work references Charles Ives's 'Concord' Sonata and specific choral pieces by Michael Moerane ('Ruri', meaning 'Truly'), Reuben Caluza ('Umantindane', meaning 'Tokoloshe') and Joshua Mohapeloa ('Senqu', meaning 'Orange River'). But the web of musical allusions becomes even more intricate, extending to include Ntsikana, Benjamin Tyamzashe, Nancarrow, Rzewski, Busoni and the Liszt operatic paraphrase *Reminiscences of Lucia di Lammermoor*. Blake's technique of fragmentation and repetition remains recognisable in this ambitious work, but the 'spider's strategem' of extreme compression expandable to larger web-like structures suffers from the denotative explicitness of the work's dense referential world. This is so not least because this referential field is often invoked directly, through quotation, creating a fractured surface very

31. See for instance his own description of his *Carpet of memory*, completed in 1998 and revised in 2006: 'There are no tunes as such in this piece, there is no thematic development, there is no traditional harmony, there is no teleology, there is no narrative'; Michael Blake, in 'Michael Blake's *Carpet of Memory*', filmed by Aryan Kaganof, 21 July 2011.

Ex. 5: Blake: *Piano sonata (choral)*, opening

$\text{♩} = 120$ Vivace

First system of musical notation. The key signature has two sharps (F# and C#), and the time signature is 2/4. The music is in a 4-measure phrase. The first three measures feature a forte (ff) to forte (f) dynamic in the right hand, with a piano (p) dynamic in the left hand. The fourth measure features a piano (p) dynamic in both hands. The notation includes various accidentals and articulation marks.

Second system of musical notation. The key signature has two sharps (F# and C#), and the time signature is 2/4. The music is in a 4-measure phrase. The first measure features a piano (p) dynamic in both hands. The second and third measures feature a forte (ff) to forte (f) dynamic in the right hand, with a piano (p) dynamic in the left hand. The fourth measure features a piano (p) dynamic in both hands. The notation includes various accidentals and articulation marks.

Third system of musical notation. The key signature has two sharps (F# and C#), and the time signature is 2/4. The music is in a 4-measure phrase. The first measure features a forte (ff) to forte (f) dynamic in the right hand, with a piano (p) dynamic in the left hand. The second measure features a piano (p) dynamic in both hands. The third and fourth measures feature a forte (ff) to forte (f) dynamic in the right hand, with a piano (p) dynamic in the left hand. The notation includes various accidentals and articulation marks.

Fourth system of musical notation. The key signature has two sharps (F# and C#), and the time signature is 2/4. The music is in a 4-measure phrase. The first measure features a forte (ff) to forte (f) dynamic in the right hand, with a piano (p) dynamic in the left hand. The second measure features a piano (p) dynamic in both hands. The third and fourth measures feature a forte (ff) to forte (f) dynamic in the right hand, with a piano (p) dynamic in the left hand. The notation includes various accidentals and articulation marks.

Fifth system of musical notation. The key signature has two sharps (F# and C#), and the time signature is 2/4. The music is in a 4-measure phrase. The first measure features a forte (ff) to forte (f) dynamic in the right hand, with a piano (p) dynamic in the left hand. The second measure features a piano (p) dynamic in both hands. The third and fourth measures feature a forte (ff) to forte (f) dynamic in the right hand, with a piano (p) dynamic in the left hand. The notation includes various accidentals and articulation marks.

$\text{♩} = 96$ Meno mosso

gentle bells

unlike the material-generative processes Kaganof attempted to describe by invoking the metaphor of the web. As perhaps the most important recent work by the composer, the piece poses enough unresolved musical questions to merit continued compositional interest. At the time of writing, an uncompleted symphony, opera and a Fourth String Quartet could be taking up this challenge.

Untitled coincided with the awarding of a doctorate (for a portfolio of compositions) to Blake by Rhodes University in Grahamstown. Apart from his considerable efforts concentrated on NewMusicSA and its various projects, Blake was now also teaching composition at Rhodes. When Lucia was appointed as Professor and Chair of the Wits Music Division in Johannesburg in 2002, Blake's musical activities (including, after 2006, the New Music Indabas) gradually started shifting their focus towards Gauteng. A clear indication of the geographical shift was the start of the Unyazi Electronic Music Festival (a project of NewMusicSA) in October 2005 in Gauteng. Perhaps the most significant result of Blake's relocation to Johannesburg, however, was the start of an artistic collaboration with social activist, new media artist and award-winning filmmaker Aryan Kaganof. When Blake writes of his Concerto for Piano and Orchestra (*Rain dancing*) (2005–06) that 'In composing I work like a filmmaker', it is difficult not to think of the possible influences Kaganof's own media-anarchic approach had had on the music. But the influence clearly extended both ways. Kaganof's filmic translations of Blake piano miniatures to the screen (including *Reverie*, *Prolegomena*, *Notes on melancholy* and *Il strategio del ragno*) are themselves miniature compositions of great subtlety and theoretical consciousness made possible by Blake's 'gems of compression'.³² Their biggest collaboration was with Blake's chamber ensemble film score for the feature film *SMS Sugar Man* (2006), the first feature film made with phone cameras. Although his most important, it was not his first film score. In 1998 he wrote the film score for Liza Key's documentary on the life of Dmitri Tsafendas, the assassin of Hendrik Verwoerd, entitled *A question of madness*. It is for string quartet and entitled *The furiosus*. It would be his first film score after two early career attempts (*Shaping clay* and *Weefkuns in wording*, 1976), and a precursor to two further documentary film scores (*Behlehem reborn* and *The man who knows too much*, both from 2002 and directed by Msizi Kuhlana and Liza Key respectively).

Towards the end of 2008 Blake and Lucia retired to Hout Bay near Cape Town. Marking Michael Blake's 60th birthday, it is already easy to judge the importance and influence of his work as it relates to NewMusicSA and its various projects of development, performance, recording, publishing and curatorship. If one subtracts the structural interventions of NewMusicSA, the New Music Indabas, the Unyazi Electronic Music Festival and initiatives

32. See Robin Holloway: 'Gems of compression', in *The Spectator*, 23 February 2002.

like the Bow Project from a contemplation of contemporary art music in South Africa post-1994, what remains would be, with the exceptions of singular compositions and even fewer projects of development and curatorship, a wasteland. The more difficult task is to pronounce on the importance of his large oeuvre (which one can expect to continue expanding in future) within the South African and larger international contexts.

In the music of Michael Blake, perhaps more so than any other South African composer, these contexts converse with each other (rather than addressing each other). Writing about his String Quartet no.1, Blake describes the music as 'about my relationship with two continents and two cultures which have shaped and informed my life and my work.' Africa is present everywhere in Blake's music, but his music has moved beyond the exoticising of Africa into a genuine cosmopolitan outlook without Africa having disappeared from his work. Launching the Jill Richards recordings of Blake's complete solo piano works in Johannesburg in 2008, Jean-Pierre de la Porte describes this unique position as follows:

He has come after a cusp of great visibility in this matter and he's exercised tact and reserve. He is not concerned with quotation, he's not concerned with content, nor with

Ex.6: Blake: *Toy no.1*, opening

$\text{♩} = 120$

pp

Ped (1/2 ped. sempre)



Ex.6 (continued)

transcription – he seems to be wholly concerned with certain procedures or habits, heuristics or mannerisms, not ways of thinking but ways of putting things together, which are the tectonic qualities of African music and which increasingly make up the tectonic or constructional qualities of his own music.³³

In a pencil annotation to his piano piece *A toy* (later renamed *Toy no.1*), Blake notes that the piece is ‘derived from pygmy music, but substituted with pitches from the opening of Satie’s *Trois pieces en forme de poire*’. The choice of Satie is not what is remarkable here (this small miniature gem was commissioned by Daniel Matej for the ‘... morceaux en forme de poire’ project during the Evenings of New Music in Bratislava in 1995), but the way in which allusions to Elizabethan virginal music, Satie and pygmy music become so impressively and inextricably part of the composing sensibility. This could have much to do with the fact that Blake is such a superb miniaturist, so that the ‘integrative gesture’ in these pieces is never forceful, doctrinaire or instructive. We hear in Blake, in the words of Robin Holloway discussing the miniatures of Federico Mompou and Howard Skempton: ‘divulgence of a brief span in actual time from something interminable, receding into the dim past, extending into the dim future, like some endless landscape focusing only temporarily into visibility, suggesting infinitely more of the same’.³⁴ Music not of place, but of time. Blake is not unsure of who he is and where he lives. He is not obsessed with Africa, nor is he chained to ‘the West’. He is perhaps the first South African composer to be unselfconsciously an African composer. His are the blueprints and strategems of a new cosmopolitan South African sound.

33. Jean-Pierre de la Porte: ‘Speech given on the occasion of Michael Blake’s first CD launch’, Johannesburg, 2008. See <http://kaganof.com/kagablog/category/contributors/michael-blake/page/3>.

34. Holloway: ‘Gems of compression’.